

THE SPIRIT CRYING FOR MEANING: UNIVERSITY NETWORK SUPPORT IN RESEARCH ENTERPRISE

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Abstract

Central Street Live was an innovative research-based exhibition in a campus gallery that was made possible through linking the working principles that govern Macquarie University in its core areas of business: Research, Teaching and Learning and Community Outreach. These connections enabled the project to develop a creative approach to the research and presentation of the overall project. As a result, the project allowed the State Art Gallery to identify and supplement a lacuna in their existing collection of Australian Art. This paper presents the development phases of a research-based exhibition. It shows that a University environment was necessary to complete and implement this research.

Introduction

The challenge of research is a requirement when working in a university museum environment. Yet, the shift of focus from object to viewer brought about by the “new museology” has created new work priorities and practices, particularly for university museums and collections, which already operate with limited human resources. As our work duties increasingly become more diversified, museum staff devote less time and resources to specialist areas of research.

However, commitment to allocating time for research is essential to our survival. Embarking upon an area of study that has been under-researched or ignored can, in fact, revitalize the museum’s existing exhibition program and/or establish the museum’s reputation as one that goes beyond the hype of blockbusters. For the university museums and collections in Australia, this is extremely relevant, as the public still views their existence at a distance. Furthermore, the problem remains that university museums are perceived as less accessible, less important and less interesting than national, state and regional museums.

In particular, the popularly accepted perception is that the national and state art museums are the only institutions that the public is passionate about and, further, have the resources to present major survey, retrospective exhibitions of various movements and/or individual artists in both historical and contemporary studies. In addition, a silent understanding still exists that the regional and university galleries operate on the fringe, ready to follow the center’s lead set by the national and state gallery museums. However, that is only a perception, and only when exhibitions such as *Central Street Live* gain media exposure and critical attention does the periphery emerge as a more interesting option. So, in many ways, it is exceptional when a university museum stages a major survey exhibition that challenges past historical interpretations to present a new and fresh perspective. This situation leaves a specific role for

UMAC to play in generating challenging exhibitions that contain a strong research component.

It was imperative for a large-scale exhibition such as *Central Street Live* to form a partnership with an institution that was willing to take risks. The appointment of an unknown curator using a revisionist approach to resurrect a period that had been disregarded by the mainstream curators and art historians as insignificant was both challenging and progressive. The university context was the ideal working environment from a curator’s perspective: it was outside the parameters and constraints imposed by state-run art museums and consequently could reevaluate relegation of the Central Street period to the curatorial basement by the major art institutions.

Partnerships

A partnership was considered between Macquarie University and The Lewers Bequest & Penrith Regional Gallery, a museum that recently had been refurbished through a huge government grant. With a new Lewers’ Gallery Director appointed, the *Central Street Live* project finally was approved. The project also was facilitated by the contract of an artist historian whose expertise in this field was invaluable, particularly through collection of visual and oral data.

The sharing of costs, intellectual discussions and viewpoints was stimulating and beneficial for both institutions, as was the sheer tenacity needed to complete the project on deadline. Within the university campus, collaborations were made between the history, photography and multimedia departments to broaden the scope and possibilities of the project, which enabled a creative and sustaining environment.

The support and interest expressed by colleagues provided the premise for discussion, debate and the exchange of ideas and information, which became an invaluable exercise into conceptualizing ways of seeing the exhibition develop.

Interdisciplinary

Working across the disciplines was vital to extend the parameters of historical and intellectual inquiry—where the notion of contextual and intangible material became more apparent—to enhance the compositional display. The intangible material collected and endorsed by the cross-referencing of various oral histories became just as significant as the careful selection of paintings for the exhibition. The blueprint for the spatial arrangements was made in advance, but the final arrival of all the works selected from both private and public collections brought together new and unforeseen relations. Working in a more flexible university environment allowed the blueprint to be modified, rather than it governing the spatial composition and thereby compromising the new and unexpected ideas.

The resulting installation defied the notion of arranging objects in terms of art history and categories. The objects and accompanying textual panels containing snapshots of contemporary artists gave a social and cultural dimension to the overall display. In addition, the posters, invitations and letters from that period provided the semiotics which delivered a direct link to the paintings, sculpture and installation pieces.

Often, art historical constructions dominate the themes of an exhibition at the expense of aesthetic dimensions. As the paintings were about color, the aesthetics were important. The arrangement was made through a collaborative process and gave careful consideration to color relationships. The results were captivating as viewers were shocked by the strong color effects and illusions created from the paintings within the space. *Central Street Live* represented a much brighter and dynamic past than we ever imagined.

Macquarie University encourages and supports professional development for its entire museum staff. The freedom and flexibility of our work practices provided the essential time needed to perform the consuming fieldwork of interviews and examining sites. The fieldwork, not library research, was the most challenging part within the curatorial process, but it became the vital methodology of disseminating new information in the Central Street narrative. The various intangible elements collated in the field determined the curatorial direction of the project that guided the visual display of the exhibition.

The Context of the Central Street Project

Central Street gallery was opened in 1966 and survived a short history until its closure in 1970 (Fig. 1). It left an indelible mark upon the entire art scene in Australia, as the gallery and its artists challenged the whole ethos of Australian painting by attacking the establishment that supported a nationalist agenda. The Central Street artists, well traveled, returned with

their international and therefore un-Australian ideas, attitudes and confidence. It heralded an era that would begin to compare the local with that of the international, producing a cosmopolitan forum.

Many informants from the Central Street days were contacted and informally interviewed. The results were astounding, as the time and distance of some forty years produced oral transmissions that refuted prior interpretations and revealed a more diversified approach by the artists than previously believed. This new evidence actually informed and guided the curatorial strategies and objectives. The oral information was used as evidence to support the theory that Central Street mixed American style with London attitude in an Australian context, thus disputing the previously believed notion that it was a pure form of American imperialism.

Australia's own brand of hard-edge paintings emerged—the movement was best understood as hybridization rather than blind conformity of dependency. As the reexamination of this period has demonstrated that the Central Street paintings are equivalent in stature and quality to their American and English counterparts, it now would be auspicious to make those comparisons extricating the differences and commonalities in the context of the sociopolitical climate of the late 1960s. It took a place like Central Street to bring the national versus international debate into the public arena. Central Street's existence thus had a major impact on the overall question of national identity. The artists' beliefs, practices and philosophies generally sought to create dissidence.

Why Central Street at Macquarie?

The Central Street project was highly appropriate in terms of both historical and contemporary perspectives within the university context. Like the Central Street Gallery itself, Macquarie University was born in the 1960s—and could not have emerged the way it did in any other era. It was established specifically as a radical and innovative experiment, consciously different from the older Australian universities. Along with other 1960s universities emerging around the world, it nurtured an interdisciplinary culture.

These connections made Macquarie the most appropriate place for research of this nature, as Central Street also questioned the parochial attitudes and culture of the time. The university context nurtures and provides firm support for active research in the museum field that will attract and sustain new audiences. Scholarship can embrace wide-ranging exploration of the way research can constantly reinvent and produce new and challenging displays contributing to the museum's annual programming. Stimulating and changing exhibitions, rather than fixed and permanent displays that can often render the university museum irrelevant to outreach, can



Fig. 1. Central Street Gallery Sydney (downstairs) Group Exhibition—Paintings and Sculpture, November 12-29, 1969. Photograph by Mike Dangar.

indeed measure the success of that museum in attracting new audiences.

Narratives

The incorporation of micro narratives within the overall exhibition development produced a display that moved the viewer to construct personal links between the objects on display. The intangible elements gathered during fieldwork—such as attitudes, language, beliefs and stories of the time that were not part of official history—contributed significantly to the overall installation: they permitted the development of interesting organic, spatial and contextual connections. These display methodologies broadened the notion of intangible heritage in both the arts and humanities.

Macro Narrative

The artist Tony McGillick played a leading role in the macro narrative structure informing the conceptual development of the exhibition. For most people, Central Street was reactionary. However, informants revealed a different dimension to this previously espoused assumption, demonstrating that the site caused conflict between rival art groups, and that its artists were more progressive than commonly believed. McGillick's intriguing information lead to a search which uncovered previously unknown and unpublished letters that McGillick wrote in 1965. This was a major breakthrough for the direction of the project. The letters became the

focus of the curator's catalogue essay which identified Tony McGillick, for the first time, as a political cult figure of the 1960s. Through careful reading of the letters, and many interviews with those who knew him well, his character emerged and set the pace for the exhibition. The letters gave shape to the structure of the exhibition and revealed the collective memory of a young group of artists whose experiences of the London scene represented a formative period in their development.¹ They transmitted to the Sydney scene acumen in the cultural and political landscape within the Australian context in a subtle yet powerful way:

Henneky's [in London] was the scene. That grouping together was really invaluable to all of us. It was a practical education—one was practicing art among young artists. And we were bombarded with impressions from all over the world. (qtd. in Davis 2002)

The Audience

The pioneer artist of Australian psychedelia, Vernon Trewicke, who had been formally neglected by art historians and institutions, resurfaced as a result of the Central Street project. Trewicke's original 1967 psychedelic exhibition room from the Central Street Gallery was recreated. The room contained three-dimensional paintings sourced from that period. The darkened room was illuminated with blue lights. The sounds of Ravi Shankar's music echoed throughout the room, recreating the 1967 space which was referred



Fig. 2. Installation view of *Central Street Live* at Macquarie University Art Gallery, March 7–May 5, 2003. Photograph by Effy Alexakis.

to as the “psychedelic cellar.” The ultraviolet lights caused the paintings to glow, move and expand, which heightened visitor interaction with the 3D paintings. As early as 1969, the esteemed Australian critic and historian Daniel Thomas made the insightful comment that the work of Treweeke was “the only psychedelic art being done on a serious level in Australia.” Yet, his works did not generate further critical attention until the beginning of the next century.

This was an active component of the exhibition, where visitors felt the drama and atmosphere of the sixties and were issued 3D glasses to view works, which also enhanced their experience. The room proved to be a major attraction for both adults and children.

Beneficial to the whole process was the strong educational component contained within the exhibition, which informed and encouraged adults and youths to ask questions and exchange ideas in a self-guided fashion. Reminiscence recaptured the sixties in its fashion and music with the urgency of the protest era activating the space (Fig. 2).

Lasting Effects

A survey exhibition devoted to Treweeke was later staged at the Penrith Regional Gallery in 2003. It received significant television, radio and print media coverage. And for late 2004, the work of Ian Milliss—yet another ignored artist of the period—will be staged at Macquarie University as an extension to the continuing research into *Central Street* and its aftermath. His career in early conceptual practice and left-wing politics will be highlighted in this exhibition. The show is currently in its developmental stage.

Conclusion

Such was the success of the *Central Street Live* exhibition that it established a significant profile for Macquarie University Art Gallery. Essentially, it motivated serious recognition by the arts community toward the Gallery as a critically proactive collecting institution for the period of the 1960s. *Central Street Live* confirmed that university museums are in a unique position to undertake research-based exhibitions that will actually instigate and encourage debate. After all, the university environment is about inciting differing opinions and the museum space can act as a center for debate and questioning of issues pertinent to our culture and society. This, of course, was what *Central Street* was all about.

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Notes

¹ Select segments of the collected letters have been published in the *Central Street Live* catalogue. See Davis for more information.

Works Cited

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